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ABSTRACT

This paper details the recommendations of the National Education Association for the 108th Congress and the administration to better ensure that no child is left behind and that every child is fully prepared for a lifetime of quality education. The recommendations include: (1) enacting landmark legislation providing assistance to the states for the creation of free, universal, public, voluntary preschool programs; (2) strengthening Head Start and Early Head Start; (3) keeping Head Start in the Department of Health and Human Services; (4) reauthorizing Temporary Assistance to Needy Families with substantially increased funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant; and (5) expanding Title I preschool services to cover currently unserved low-income children ages 3 to 5 years. The paper also discusses the crisis in child care, the importance of proper stimulation and education from birth through age six to ensure full brain development, and the benefits of early childhood education investments. It is argued that positioning early childhood education within the public school system will overcome what is perhaps the single greatest obstacle to quality early childhood education--the low pay, minimal benefits, and high turnover for staff. The paper asserts that by making free, universal, public school-linked, voluntary prekindergarten a centerpiece of national educational policy, the 108th Congress and the administration can help to ensure that every child enters school ready to learn and succeed and that no child is left behind. (Contains 34 endnotes.) (KB)

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Keeping the Promise to America's Preschoolers.

National Education Association

2003

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Keeping the Promise to America's Preschoolers

It is time for the United States to acknowledge society's stake in and responsibility for early education, as it long has for older children, by making publicly-funded prekindergarten available to all preschool children whose parents want them to enroll.[i]

—Committee for Economic Development, 2002

A child's time in elementary, middle, and high school may be the centerpiece of her education. But a child's education *before* entering kindergarten—or lack thereof—can actually make a defining difference in how well she performs in school.

Research now makes clear that a child's experiences and education at ages three, four, and five have a decisive impact not only through the remainder of his formal education but even into adulthood.[ii]

However, today, our nation invests the least in the education of those whose brains are growing the most—toddlers and preschoolers. While government at all levels invested $392.2 billion in elementary and secondary education and $171 billion in public colleges and universities in the 2000-01 academic year, public investment in early child care and education was estimated at between $20 and $25 billion.[iii]

For the United States to ensure that no child is left behind, we must provide all children who need it with the quality early education that will prepare them to succeed in school and throughout their lives.

Early Childhood Education Recommendations

America must make substantial, targeted additional investments to ensure that every child enters school ready to excel. To meet the true scope of the challenge, the federal government must exercise its traditional leadership role, in partnership with state and local governments.

ED 471 602

The National Education Association (NEA) recommends that the 108th Congress and the administration take the following actions to ensure that no child is left behind and that every child is fully prepared for a lifetime of quality education:

Make public universal preschool a reality

NEA urges the 108th Congress and the administration to enact landmark legislation extending our nation's commitment to universal education to all children who will receive lifelong benefits as a result. This new legislation should:

- **Provide assistance to the states for the creation of free, universal, voluntary prekindergarten programs**, with an initial authorization of $5 billion, increasing over five years to $20 billion, with a 50 percent match by the states—and full funding through the appropriations process.
- **Link universal preschool with the resources, infrastructure, and talent of public school systems**, thus ensuring equal access and opportunity, as well as full accountability to parents and taxpayers. Equally important, the public schools will then have a greater ability to ensure uniformly high standards for preschool teachers. Moreover, linking public schools with universal preschool provides the added benefit of enhancing coordination among the developmental, educational, and institutional components of the schooling process and ensuring a smooth transition from preschool to elementary school.
- **Require states to align preschool and kindergarten standards as well as consistency between curriculums.**
- **Ensure that states require the licensing and certification of all preschool instructors.** These standards should be comparable those already in place for elementary and secondary school teachers, with the additional requirement that instructors be trained in the pedagogy of preschool education. No less an authority than the National Research Council has recommended that children in preschool be assigned a teacher who has a bachelor's degree and specialized education in early childhood pedagogies.[iv]
- **Assist states with the infrastructure improvements that will be required**, especially the addition of classrooms and schools.
- **Keep control of public preschools fully in the hands of state and local governments.**
- **Integrate universal preschool with existing Head Start programs while fully maintaining the vital services Head Start children and families currently receive.**

High-quality, universal, public school-linked, voluntary preschool is an idea whose time has come. It would be an ideal complement to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

Summary of NEA Early Childhood Education Recommendations

To ensure that every child enters school ready to learn and succeed, the National Education Association urges the 108th Congress and the administration to:

- Enact landmark legislation providing assistance to the states for the creation of free, universal, public, voluntary preschool programs that:
  - Are linked with the resources, infrastructure, and talent of the public schools;
  - Implement curricula that are based on state learning standards for pre-kindergarten;
  - Hire only licensed, certified, and fully qualified instructional staff.
- Strengthen Head Start and Early Head Start by:
  - Putting them on a path to full funding within five years so all eligible children are served;
  - Providing additional assistance to help states integrate the Head Start curriculum with the public schools curricula;
  - Utilizing multiple measures of assessment to accurately gauge performance;
  - Ensuring that states implementing free, universal preschool programs, as outlined above, integrate Head Start with their new initiatives while fully maintaining the services Head Start children and families currently receive.
- Keep Head Start in the Department of Health & Human Services

The benefits of Head Start are not purely academic. Its health, social, emotional, and other services are vitally important to children and their families and have proven successful in overcoming barriers to equal opportunity.

- Reauthorize Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) with substantially increased funding levels for the Child Care and Development Block Grant to meet the child care needs of every low- and moderate-income family within five years, improve the quality of child care, and raise the standards, pay, and benefits of child care workers.
- Expand Title I preschool services to cover currently unserved low-income children between the ages of three and five.

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because it would do as much to ensure that third through eighth graders achieve adequate yearly progress on their test scores as any other step that could be taken.

A host of recent reports affirm this point. The longest and most comprehensive analysis, the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention project in North Carolina, for example, reveals that children receiving high-quality early child education score much higher on reading and math tests from the elementary school through middle adolescence than their peers who did not have comparable preschool experiences. They also are twice as likely to receive a higher education and are now projected to earn approximately $143,000 more over their lifetimes.[v] (See the box on page 16 for more information.)

Similarly, a long-term study of the Chicago Child-Parent Center found that economically disadvantaged children attending high-quality preschool had a significantly reduced need for school remedial services, higher rates of college attendance, and greater earnings than their peers who did not attend preschool.[vi]

These rigorous academic analyses provide empirical confirmation of what NEA members already know from first-hand experience—that there is a huge difference in academic performance and even classroom behavior between students who attended quality preschool programs and those who did not.

As a result, several states are breaking new ground in providing quality, academically oriented preschool to four year-olds, recognizing the positive impact on school readiness. Georgia is currently the only state providing free, voluntary, universal prekindergarten for all four-year-olds statewide. New York and Oklahoma are moving toward this goal, while New Jersey and Kentucky offer free preschool for low-income children. Florida voters passed a referendum in November 2002 calling for universal prekindergarten and West Virginia enacted legislation mandating universal preschool by 2012.[vii]

This movement is occurring not only because it improves student achievement, but also because the current nonsystem of child care is unaffordable to many parents (often as much as tuition at a public college and university), inadequate to meet the demand, and often sorely lacking in quality. With 64 percent of children between the ages of three and five in child care or preschool,[viii] it is essential to ensure that they receive a developmentally appropriate, high quality education. The days of "baby-sitting" should be long gone.

An even greater advantage of establishing public school-linked universal preschool is that it will facilitate higher teacher quality. A recent study of prekindergarten staffing in five key states found that teachers in public programs were better paid and, therefore, better qualified and less likely to leave their jobs than their counterparts in private programs.[ix] (See page 16 for more information.)

But relying on the states alone to implement the national imperative of extending universal public education to four-year-olds (and ideally three-year-olds as well) cannot be sufficient. With the states reeling from budget deficits estimated collectively at $75 billion in fiscal year 2004, the resources are not there. Federal leadership is urgently needed.

Fully fund Head Start and strengthen linkages to public schools

NEA urges the 108th Congress and the administration to:

- **Increase Head Start and Early Head Start funding through the appropriations process to put them on a path to full funding by FY 2008.**
- **Provide additional funding to help states align the Head Start standards with public schools.**
- **Utilize qualitative research to accurately gauge the performance of Head Start programs.**

Head Start works. One of the most successful federal programs in history, Head Start has provided high-quality early child education, health, social services, and parental involvement programs to more than 18.5 million low-income children between the ages of three and five since its creation in 1964.[x]

However, Head Start has one major problem: lack of funding. As a result, it only serves approximately 60 percent of eligible children.[xi] The investment in Head Start did increase by nearly $933 million in fiscal year (FY) 2001, bringing the total appropriation to $6.2 billion. Funding was raised again to $6.5 billion in FY 2002. FY 2003 funding provided a small increase to almost $6.7 billion. The administration's FY 2004 budget has another small increase, to under $6.8 billion. These are positive and important steps forward, yet they still leave millions of eligible children unable to take advantage of the incomparable early child development and education Head Start provides.

Full funding of Head Start would require an additional investment of $29 billion over five years above the FY 2002 and 2003 levels. This would enable Head Start to serve all eligible preschoolers by the fifth year. It would also enable Early Head Start to serve one-quarter of eligible infants and toddlers if it was accompanied by a gradual increase in the Early Head Start set-aside to about 40 percent in the fifth year. This investment will save money in the long run because it will reduce the costs of special education, social services, teen pregnancy, juvenile crime, and other problems a dozen years down the road. And it will be made in a time-tested, proven initiative.

In addition, the federal government should strongly support efforts to link Head Start's curricula to the curricula offered in kindergarten at local public schools. This will ensure a more seamless transition from preschool to school and it will strengthen the initiative's

academic component. However, Head Start's benefits are not purely academic. Its health, social, parental involvement, and other services are vitally important to children and their families and have been proven successful in overcoming the full range of barriers to equal opportunity they face. These services should be continued.

To accurately guage the performance of Head Start programs, we believe that academic research projects that assess a sample group of children and do that primarily through observational techniques should be utilized because they are more appropriate for preschoolers. Four-year-olds' development and skills are not yet suited to taking tests, in conventional or alternative formats. The use of multiple methods of assessment is the only way to measure how well Head Start programs are preparing the children and families they serve for the future.

Ensure that all working parents can access and afford high quality child care for their children

NEA urges the 108th Congress and the administration to:

- **Reauthorize TANF, but with substantially increased Child Care and Development Bock Grant (CCDBG) funding levels** over the next five years to meet the needs of every parent with young children trying to leave cash assistance, as well as every family whose income is too low to afford child care on their own.
- **Increase the portion of CCDBG funding that goes toward improving the quality of child care** so that even children too young for preschool receive the proper brain stimulation and education they need to develop properly.
- **Provide assistance to the states to raise educational requirements for child care workers concomitantly with their pay and benefits** so that infants and young children are cared for and taught by qualified professionals and a more stable workforce.

The working parents of children under age six must be able to place their children in safe, caring, quality care in order to keep their jobs and achieve financial independence. For parents trying to leave Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), this is an absolute prerequisite.

With the reauthorization of TANF under consideration in the 108th Congress, legislators have a unique opportunity to strengthen the ability of TANF recipients to leave cash assistance and raise themselves above the poverty level, while at the same time improving their children's future prospects through quality early childhood education.

NEA opposed the House-passed reauthorization bill in February 2003 based largely on the fact that it provided no new child care funds for the next five years. As more low-income parents struggle to achieve independence, they should be assured that their children are safe and are receiving the necessary skills for later success.

CCDBG, which will be reauthorized in the TANF legislation, is the primary source of child care assistance to low-income families with young children. Funds are also used to raise the quality of child care. The federal investment in child care block grants is matched with state funds.

With all-day child care costing between $4,000 and $10,000 per year[xii] while more than one out of four families with young children earns less than $25,000 a year,[xiii] this aid is the only way many parents can afford to work and ensure their children are being cared for safely and educated properly.

Unfortunately, only one in seven children eligible for child care assistance through CCDBG receives it, due to lack of funding. In FY 2002, the child care block grant received appropriations of $2.1 billion in discretionary funding and $2.7 billion in mandatory funding, a portion of which must be matched by the states. However, the administration's TANF plan would freeze CCDBG funding for the next five years with no adjustments for inflation.[xiv] This would actually reduce the already too-small number of children receiving this vital assistance.

Two other factors further threaten the ability of states to offer child care assistance to more needy families. First, in past years, states were able to allocate a significant portion of their TANF funds for child care because the strong economy and their success in helping families leave cash assistance resulted in TANF surpluses. In some cases, the amount of TANF money going toward child care actually equaled or exceeded the level of CCDBG funds. However, the weakening economy has eliminated most states' TANF surpluses and this source of child care funding is gone for the foreseeable future. Second, the administration's TANF proposal would increase the work requirements for TANF recipients to 40 hours a week. This would further increase the demand for child care at a time when federal funding is declining.

The Universal Preschool Initiative outlined above would resolve this problem for many parents of children between the ages of three and five. Nevertheless, much more must be done to ensure the proper care and early education of these children when their parents must work at jobs involving nontraditional hours—and to meet the needs of parents of younger children and infants.

Expand Title I preschool services

NEA urges the 108th Congress and the administration to:

- **Expand Title I preschool services—the early child component of the most important federal investment in ensuring educational excellence among low-income children—to cover currently unserved low-income children between the ages of three and five.**

Recognizing that early intervention is essential to closing the so-called "achievement gap" between lower-income and more affluent students, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act can be used by local school districts to provide preschool services to children beginning at age three. Unfortunately, only 311,000 preschool children currently receive Title I services. Because Title I is underfunded, this is an exceptionally underutilized program. It is time to make greater use of its potential.

Society's Obligation to Young Children's Healthy Development

The recommendations above will go a long way toward ensuring that every child receives the early education he or she needs to succeed in school and that the needs of families with young children are met.

These recommendations recognize the reality is that education begins at birth. If our society is to ensure that no child is left behind, we must do more for the education of children before they enter kindergarten.

A true crisis

Ask any kindergarten or first-grade teacher and she will talk at length about the dramatic differences between children who receives a quality early childhood education and those who did not. Teachers report that one-third of children entering kindergarten are unprepared for school, according to the Carnegie Corporation.[xv] According to another study, 46 percent of kindergarten teachers reported that half of their class or more have difficulty following directions, inadequate academic skills, disorganized home environments, trouble working independently, and other problems.[xvi] Every child should enter school ready to excel.

Because two-thirds of mothers with children under age six work outside the home,[xvii] and because 55 percent of working women are responsible for at least half their families' earnings,[xviii] some 13 million children under age six are regularly cared for by someone other than their parents.[xix] It is the quality of this care that will be perhaps the single greatest factor in determining whether these children go to school prepared to maximize their education or whether they are left behind.

These children need quality child care. Unfortunately, as noted previously, their parents usually have trouble affording it or finding it, even under the best of circumstances.

Research shows quality child care is critical

A preponderance of research makes it crystal clear that children need proper stimulation and education from birth through age six in order to ensure full brain development and

adequate preparation for the rigors of school. The results can be seen early on, as children in high quality preschool programs show superior performance compared to their peers on many levels as they progress through elementary school. A University of North Carolina study found that children who receive high quality child care not only perform better in mathematics, they also have greater thinking and attention skills and fewer behavioral problems than children in lower quality child care programs.[xx]

The benefits actually broaden over time. Research shows that children who receive quality early childhood education are more likely to graduate from high school and go to college and are less likely to need special education services, repeat a grade level, become teen parents, or engage in criminal activity than other at-risk youth. A Rand Corporation study found that children who went through high quality preschool programs showed long-lasting improvements in their cognitive and emotional development, as well as their health.[xxi] As noted above, the Abecedarian and Chicago studies showed higher earnings as well.

Interestingly, research is showing that the parents of children who went through high-quality preschool programs benefit as well. The Rand study found that their economic self-sufficiency improved.[xxii] Mothers of preschool children in the Abecedarian Project received more education and better jobs than mothers whose children did not receive a comparable early child education.

Investments in early childhood education return tangible dividends

A series of recent studies have attempted to quantify the long-term return to the government and society for each dollar invested in quality early childhood education. For example, an analysis of the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, found that the program's return to society averaged nearly $48,000 per participant, due to increased earnings, savings from lower crime rates, and a lessened need for educational remedial services. The cost per child averaged $6,739 for 18 months of participation.[xxiv]

The Rand Corporation examined the Perry Preschool Program in Ypsilanti, Michigan, but limited its estimate of the benefits of early childhood education strictly to governmental savings—higher tax revenues from higher earnings, and lower educational, welfare, and criminal justice costs. It found a long-term return of $2 to the government for dollar invested in preschool.[xxv]

Perhaps the most comprehensive cost-benefit analysis was recently completed on the Abecedarian Project by the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER). It showed a $4 return on each taxpayer dollar invested.[xxvi] (See the box on page 16 for more information.)

Public preschool means higher quality

Perhaps the single greatest obstacle in the way of raising the quality of early child education is the low pay, minimal benefits, and high turnover for staff. Hourly wages for child care workers average $6.61, which earn someone working full-time at 40 hours/week approximately $13,750 a year. Preschool teachers' hourly wages average $8.32, for full-time annual earnings of approximately $17,300. That compares to the wages of parking lot attendants, and is significantly less than those of animal trainers, bus drivers, and licensed practical nurses.[xxviii]

As a result, it should not be surprising that it is extremely hard for child care centers and preschools to hire and retain quality teachers, with turnover rates in the vicinity of 30 percent each year.[xxix]

Making matters worse are often-lax state regulations. Some 30 states do not require teachers in child care centers to have any early childhood training before they begin working with children. By contrast, hairdressers and manicurists must receive 1,500 hours of training before they can get a license.[xxx]

A recent comprehensive study of prekindergarten programs in California, Georgia, Chicago, New York state, and Texas points the way toward the right solution to the quality crisis—utilizing the public system of education. As the study's authors wrote:

> *Teachers employed in public school-operated or other publicly-operated Pre-K programs in the five study sites . . . generally had attained more formal education, received higher wages and benefits, and experienced greater job stability than did their counterparts in privately-operated, nonprofit or for-profit programs.*[xxxi]

The study found that:

- Teaching staff in public preschools had higher qualifications than their counterparts in private preschools. This was true despite the fact that all five states set the same educational requirements for prekindergarten staff, regardless of whether they are employed in public or private programs. In California, 82 percent of public prekindergarten teachers had at least an associate's degree and 30 percent had earned at least a bachelor's degree. By contrast, just 8 percent of private prekindergarten teachers had received an associate's degree.[xxxii]

- Pay was higher for teaching staff in public prekindergarten programs. In four of the five states, hourly wages for public prekindergarten teachers approached those of public kindergarten teachers. In all of the states, wages for private prekindergarten teachers were comparable to hourly wages for *assistant* teachers in public programs. Public teaching staff were also more likely to receive health insurance and pension benefits. Notably, in three of the states, between 96 and 98 percent of prekindergarten teachers

Concrete Benefits to Quality Early Child Education

Starting in the 1970s, the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention Project in North Carolina has been more closely studied over a longer period of time than any other comparison between children who participate in high-quality preschool and those who do not. The most recent study sought to quantify the long-term benefits of early child education both for the children who participated and their families. It found:

- Children who went through high-quality preschool can be expected to earn approximately $143,000 more over their lifetimes than their peers who did not participate.
- The mothers of preschool children are estimated to earn approximately $133,000 more over their lifetimes than the mothers of children who did not participate.
- School districts save more than $11,000 per child because those in high-quality preschool are less likely to need remedial or special education.
- Even the children of those children in high-quality preschool are projected to earn nearly $48,000 more over the course of their lifetimes.

Though the average annual cost of the Abecedarian Project is $13,000 per child in 2002 dollars—approximately twice the cost of Head Start—the researchers concluded that the long-term benefits to government and society are four times that amount. Moreover, because the children studied were largely middle class residents of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, many experts believe the "rate of return" for quality early childhood education is even greater for lower-income children in urban and rural areas.[xxvii]

were represented by a union. They, in turn, tended to have higher wages,[xxxiii] a factor that directly correlates to higher teacher quality and stability.

- Publicly operated prekindergarten programs had much more staff stability. In three of the states, turnover among public prekindergarten teachers was comparable to turnover among K-12 teachers. Turnover rates among public preschool teachers were approximately one-third those of private preschool teachers.[xxxiv]

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By making free, universal, public school-linked, voluntary prekindergarten a centerpiece of national educational policy, the 108th Congress and the administration can go a long way toward ensuring that every child enters school ready to learn and succeed and that no child is left behind.

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